



James Cox

## Held Behind Walls In Katrina's Wake, They Also Serve

**Convicts at Bogalusa, La.,  
Provide Hurricane Relief;  
Warden's Chainsaw Gang**

By GARY FIELDS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
*September 14, 2005; Page A1*

BOGALUSA, La. -- James Cox plunged his scarred, rough hands into the ice bucket to fish out two bottles of Gatorade and handed them to Tammey Duncan. A resident of devastated Washington Parish, she was waiting in line at the emergency-aid station in an industrial park here.

Mr. Cox, a prisoner for nearly 30 years, is serving time for armed robbery at the Washington Correctional Institute. In the past two weeks, though, he has also been a first responder, one of dozens of inmates in orange jumpsuits who have been driving forklifts, clearing debris and handing out food and water to people living here near the Mississippi line.

As Louisiana digs out from Hurricane Katrina, convicts have been opening roads with axes and chainsaws and doing other useful work. At Angola State Penitentiary, near Baton Rouge, inmates produced mattresses for shelters. Some prisoners have even donated money from what little they are paid so evacuees can buy postage stamps.

"I've been a thug since 1966, and this feels good," said Mr. Cox, a brawny, tattooed 53-year-old. "When people come up and you look into their faces and see all the sadness, and then they thank you like you are the one giving this stuff to them, it makes you tear up."

Opened in 1983 to house 500 inmates, the Washington Correctional Institute now holds 1,200 men, most here on drug charges, and it employs 418 people, making it one of the largest employers in the parish. Since Katrina struck, this medium-security prison 70 miles north of New Orleans has sent scores of inmates every day with corrections officers to work in the parish. The jobs don't pay well -- 20 cents an hour, at best. But unlike the vast majority of the 43,900 people of this parish, the prisoners go back at day's end to hot showers, warm meals and electric lighting.

All of the prisoners who have been helping are "trusties," men who are given special privileges -- like getting to leave the prison grounds under supervision -- because of their exemplary disciplinary records.



James Miller



The hurricane has resulted in neither riots nor escapes. Because the prison is surrounded by dense, forbidding woods, running away isn't much of an option. Indeed, since Katrina hit, the Louisiana state prison system has been relatively peaceful despite moving 8,000 inmates from prisons damaged by the hurricane to 13 different facilities.


In large part, that's because some of the prison authorities, such as Warden James Miller here at the Washington Correctional Institute, were a lot better prepared for the hurricane than state and federal authorities were.

On Aug. 29, the morning Katrina's eye passed about 30 miles east of here, prisoners huddled in the dorms watching the horizontal rain, listening as the gravel on the roof whipped off and shattered windshields a half-mile away. Heating units were torn off the buildings. About that time, two 10-foot-high fences topped with razor wire were breached by the storm.

While most inmates were locked in their cells, one crew of officers and trustees rushed to turn off a leaking main gas line. Fifty others, standing in the rain and wind, raised and welded the downed fence that confines them. As the storm began to subside, Warden Miller, who lives on the prison grounds, sent six crews of inmates and corrections officers out. Their instructions were to clear one lane on all the main roads in the parish.

As the men made their way out among downed power lines and roads littered with fallen trees, a radio call came in asking for help clearing the road to the emergency management center in Bogalusa. Another team from the prison headed that way with their axes, hatchets and saws to cut and move the downed trees from the roadway. Mr. Miller, 50 years old, had his own personal emergency management plan in place. He had backup generators with a stockpile of fuel. The prison was already equipped with one of the largest food-storage facilities in the parish. It was so well stocked there was no chance food would run out and the prison was able to help out the school system, which had food in danger of spoiling.

The warden's biggest concern was gasoline to power the generators. As soon as the storm passed, Mr. Miller pulled out the satellite phone he had reserved for such emergencies and called Richard Stalder, the state's corrections chief, to arrange for additional fuel supplies. Mr. Miller has been able to give each of his workers 10 gallons of gas every two days so they can drive to work. Others, including a few officers, stayed over at a makeshift shelter on the prison grounds. "This isn't the kind of place where you can just let everybody take off work -- I've got to have them here," Mr. Miller said.



It has been hard for many inmates to grasp what has been happening outside the prison. About 85% of the inmates here are from the New Orleans area, and they had no access to news reports until the warden videotaped a newscast and played it on the prison's television system.

The TV rooms were silent as inmates crowded in. Darrell Johnson, 49, who has been here nine months for a parole violation, was watching the screen when he saw his neighborhood, then recognized his street and family home, all underwater. "I'm just hoping everybody got out safe," he said of his two brothers and two sisters. "You can't call because of the phone situation here, and there's no sense in writing a letter. The mail ain't got nowhere to go. I have no idea what shelter they went to or even what city they might be in."

Pausing while he moved pallets of baby formula, Keshawn Patterson, 27, said, "We can't help our families ... At least doing this, helping, it takes your mind off it for a while."

A challenge for the prison is finding the families of prisoners who are soon to be released. The institute has already located the families of 180 prisoners and will continue to make calls and to use the Red Cross and other means to try to find them. The state still needs to figure out how to keep track of inmates on parole or probation should they leave Louisiana -- and to coordinate with other states.

Meanwhile, to keep operations here normal, Mr. Miller hasn't canceled regular visiting days. And letters will go into the files of inmates who have helped out in the hurricane relief effort, intended to help the men when they come up for parole.